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SUBJECT: THE VIEW FROM NEMURO: HEART OF THE RUSSO-JAPANESE TERRITORIAL DISPUTE

Classified By: Political Minister Counselor W. Michael Meserve. Reason : 1.4 (b)(d).

¶11. (C) Summary: Local governments in Hokkaido Prefecture are promoting the return of the four islands comprising the disputed Northern Territories in part by fostering "mutual understanding" with the islands' Russian residents. Visa-free exchanges and humanitarian assistance are their primary tools. Officials are worried about diminished interest in the territorial issue and have focused on increasing awareness of the dispute among Japanese youth. Local officials are concerned about travel to the disputed islands by Americans using Russian visas. Russia has yet to grant permission for the Japanese to start harvesting this year's seaweed crop in the waters of the Northern Territories, resulting in a projected 8 billion yen (USD 70 million) loss for June. End Summary.

¶12. (C) Embassy Tokyo Political Officer journeyed to Japan's northern prefecture, Hokkaido, June 4-8 to gather local views of Russo-Japanese relations. In Japan's eastern-most city of Nemuro, city officials reviewed issues relating to the territorial dispute with Russia over the four islands that lie just off the coast of Nemuro. At the end of World War II, when the islands were occupied by Soviet troops, 17,291 Japanese residents of the islands fled back to mainland Japan. Since then, Japan and Russia have been locked in a territorial dispute and have yet to conclude a formal peace treaty. Japan's official line is that all four islands are Japanese territory and must be returned to Japan before it will conclude a peace treaty. Russia counters that it is willing to return the two islands of Shikotan and Habomai following the conclusion of a peace treaty.

Visa-Free Exchanges: Promoting Understanding or Shopping?

¶13. (C) Hokkaido Prefectural Government's Northern Territories Countermeasures Headquarters Deputy Director Hitoshi Ikemoto explained that 2006 marks the 15th anniversary of a special program that allows reciprocal visa-free visits between the islands and Nemuro. Local Japanese officials hope the ongoing visa-free exchanges will promote a "mutual understanding" between Japanese and Russian citizens that will ultimately lead to the reversion of the Northern Territories to Japan. Over the past 14 years, 7,262 Japanese have visited the Northern Territories, and 5,718 Russians have made the trip to Nemuro. Former Shikotan islander Hiroshi Tokunou, who has participated in several visa-free exchanges, observed that Russian residents of the islands appear to understand that the Japanese were forced from their homes, and he believes they "are sympathetic" to the Japanese position. Japan has emphasized to the Russians that they would not be subjected to dispossession or any type of

mistreatment if the islands were to revert to Japanese control. Japan's ultimate goal is to have both Japanese and Russian residents living together under Japanese authority, Tokunou asserted.

¶4. (C) Chishima-Habomai Former Islanders Association Chairman Koizumi expressed concern that some Russian visitors view the program as a tourist trip rather than a meaningful exchange. Wealthier Russians tend to want to shop rather than learn more about Japanese culture and history, Koizumi reported. Perhaps with this in mind, Japanese organizers of the exchanges have made the NiHoRo (an acronym for Japan-Hokkaido-Russia), a multi-billion yen (roughly USD 17 million) facility built to showcase Japan's claim to the Northern Territories, the obligatory first stop in the tour. Through hands-on exhibits and high-tech displays in English, Russian and Japanese, this facility ensures that Russian participants are exposed to the official Japanese position on the Northern Territories.

Dollar Diplomacy at Work in Humanitarian Assistance

¶5. (C) Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Nemuro Municipal Office Director Masatoshi Ishigaki explained, Japan initiated a humanitarian assistance program to provide basic needs to the islands' residents. After a devastating earthquake subsequently rocked the islands and eastern Hokkaido, Japan responded by increasing humanitarian assistance through the construction of new schools and a new electric generation plant on the affected islands. At present, assistance has shifted away from disaster relief and infrastructure projects to addressing medical needs, Director Ishigaki remarked. In addition to donating medical equipment

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to the islands' hospitals, Nemuro hospitals accept critical needs medical patients from the islands. Ishigaki noted that in the first half of 2006, 15 Russian patients, most of them children, were admitted to Japanese hospitals. However, the Russian government has just announced its own development program for the four islands, Ishigaki reported, which Japanese officials fear

will diminish the islanders' reliance on and affinity for Japan.

Shikotan Residents: Pro-Japan?

¶6. (C) Director Ishigaki described a poll conducted by the Hokkaido Shimbun in November 2005 that interviewed residents from three of the islands (the fourth is uninhabited) regarding the possible return of the islands to Japanese authority. Eighty percent of Etorofu residents and 63 percent of Kunashiri residents were opposed, but more than 50 percent of Shikotan residents were in favor. Ishigaki noted two factors that might have contributed to Shikotan residents' pro-Japan inclinations. First, Russia offered to return Shikotan and the uninhabited islet group of Habomai in the 1956 Japan-U.S.S.R. Joint Declaration and has referred to this document in subsequent negotiations. Consequently, Shikotan residents may feel more "psychologically prepared" for a return to Japan. Secondly, Shikotan has more exposure to Japanese former islanders since it was first to participate in the visa-free exchanges, Ishigaki related. The visa-free exchanges may be generating a pro-Japan outlook among the Russian residents as intended, he suggested.

Keeping the Campaign Alive: Increasing Awareness

¶7. (C) With the average age of the 8,076 remaining Japanese residents of the islands nearing 73, many people fear that the momentum behind the campaign for the reversion of the Northern Territories will decline, Director Ishigaki

observed. In response, local authorities are focusing efforts on increasing awareness of the Northern Territories issue among students, "The future of the campaign," Ishigaki noted. The Nemuro Municipal Office regularly invites schools from all over Japan to visit Nemuro and see the islands from Cape Nosappu, where the nearest island is just over two miles away and clearly visible on a clear day. The city office also encourages schools to use textbooks that cover the Northern Territories issue.

¶8. (C) The main objective of the Northern Territories Restoration Campaign Alliance Federation is to raise public awareness both domestically and internationally, Federation Vice President Matsumi Mizuma explained. Subsidized by both the central government and the Hokkaido prefectural government, the Federation holds conferences for junior-high social studies teachers to teach them how to incorporate the Northern Territories issue in their syllabi, Mizuma remarked.

The Federation has also published material aimed at elementary and junior-high school students on the history and geography of the islands and encouraged university students to participate in the visa-free exchanges. To increase national awareness, the Hokkaido prefectural government established February 7th as "National Reversion Day" and the month of August as "Northern Territories Reversion Month," Deputy Director Ikemoto related. During these periods, cities in Hokkaido sponsor an array of activities from poster contests for children to signature petitions to encourage public awareness and involvement.

Use of Russian Visas by U.S Tour Groups a Concern

¶9. (C) Vice Chairman Yamamoto expressed concern about reports that several U.S. travel agencies are conducting sightseeing cruises to the Northern Territories, and that passengers are entering the islands using Russian visas. An estimated 300 third-country nationals entered the islands with Russian visas last year via these cruises, noted Yamamoto. The Japanese government regards the entry of any Japanese or third-country national into the Northern Territories using a Russian visa as "contrary" to Japan's legal claim that the islands are Japanese territory. While Japan does not prohibit its citizens from entering the Northern Territories outside of the visa-free exchange program, the Diet passed a measure in 1989 to encourage Japanese to voluntarily refrain from doing so, he explained.

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Fishing Frustrations: Seaweed Harvest Stalled

¶10. (C) The campaign for the return of the Northern Territories is not fueled solely by national pride, Hokkaido Government Subprefectural Office's Regional Policy Section Chief Satoshi Yokoyama stated; economic issues, particularly fishing rights, are also involved. In 1977 Japan became bound by a 200-mile EEZ that limits its access to the plentiful crab, salmon and seaweed (konbu) found in the Northern Territories' waters. Each year Japan pays Russia 122 million yen (USD 1.1 million) for the rights to harvest seaweed from Kaigara Island in the Habomai Group of islets. The season runs from June 1 until the end of September, with June and July comprising the peak harvest period. This year, the annual negotiations are stalled, Yokoyama said, which has caused Japan to miss the June 1 start date. Russia blames the delay on incomplete documentation, Yokoyama continued, but news reports point to an internal dispute within the Duma. If Japan is prevented from harvesting seaweed for all of June, the harvest will drop by 20 percent and Japan will suffer an 8 billion yen (USD 70 million) profit loss, Yokoyama lamented.

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